NEWS ITEMS ON CAG/ AUDIT REPORTS

1. Presentation on CAG's 'Bharatmala Pariyojana' report made to Parl's PAC *(business-standard.com, ptinews.com, economictimes.indiatimes.com)* September 5, 2023

A presentation of the recent CAG report on the 'Bharatmala Pariyojana' was made at a meeting of the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee headed by Congress MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on Tuesday, sources said.

The audit report on the implementation of Phase-I of the 'Bharatmala Pariyojana' highway projects triggered a political row with opposition parties alleging corruption in the process of awarding the project.

The Road Transport and Highways Ministry, however, has said the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) findings that the cost was exorbitant are misplaced as it did not factor in the actual cost.

The sources said at the PAC's meeting on Tuesday, there was a presentation on the CAG report, which was tabled in Parliament on August 10.

The PAC is a committee of selected MPs that audits the revenue and expenditure of the government, and its primary function is to examine a report of the CAG after it is tabled in Parliament.

During the meeting, they said, opposition members raised concerns after the 'Bharatmala Pariyojana' report's presentation.

However, the report will not be taken up for examination immediately.

According to procedure, after tabling of the report, the Road Transport and Highways Ministry was given 30 days to furnish a draft Action Taken Note to the CAG, after which the auditor will get another 30 days to vet the replies and seek further clarifications from the ministry. The report will be examined by the PAC once the process is over.

The PAC also selected additional subjects, including welfare schemes announced by the government, for examination of status and money spent, the sources said.

The panel will also examine the banking and insurance sector, which will include loans given and Non Performing Assets. Another subject which will be examined by the committee is the reforms in the energy sector, they said. https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/presentation-on-cag-s-bharatmala-pariyojana-report-made-to-parl-s-pac-123090501244_1.html

2. Public Accounts Committee examines cost hike in Bharatmala Programme *(millenniumpost.in)* September 5, 2023

In a recent session, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Indian Parliament on Tuesday delved into the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) findings regarding the cost escalation in Phase-1 of the Bharatmala Programme. The programme, aimed at constructing national highways across the country, came under scrutiny during a meeting chaired by Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, a Lok Sabha member from the Congress Party and Leader of Opposition in the Lower House.

The meeting witnessed a sharp attack by opposition members directed at the ruling NDA government over the reported cost overruns in the project. Sources familiar with the proceedings reported that the deputy CAG presented key findings, emphasising the necessity for the concerned ministry to submit a draft Action Taken Note (ATN) to the CAG for vetting within 30 days. Subsequently, CAG is allowed 30 days to review the response and seek further clarification and information from the ministry.

The PAC members were informed that the audit examined a sample of 66 projects spanning 3,546 kilometres out of a total of 291 projects encompassing 11,084 kilometres awarded under Phase-1 of the Bharatmala project. As of March 31 this year, 787 projects covering 26,316 kilometres have been awarded. However, opposition members contested the government's stance, asserting that the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the project on October 24, 2017, with a plan to develop a national highway network of 34,800 kilometres at an investment outlay of Rs 5,35,000 crore, slated for completion by September 2022. They claimed that an astounding Rs 8,46,588 crore has already been allocated, surpassing the initial budget.

Highlighting further disparities, the opposition members noted that as of March this year, 75.62 per cent of the approved length (26,316 kilometres) has been awarded, while only 38.79 per cent has been completed.

Additionally, the CAG report pointed out a substantial improvement in the pace of construction, increasing from 1.04 kilometres per day to 12.37 kilometres per day between 2018-19 and 2022-23 under the Bharatmala project.

The opposition also voiced concerns over a 2.4-fold increase in land acquisition costs and a 1.2-fold rise in civil construction costs compared to what was initially proposed to the CCEA. Both the CAG report and opposition members of the PAC underlined that some implementing agencies awarded projects without ensuring the availability of requisite land, resulting in delayed construction or completion. Environmental clearance was lacking in certain cases, including Bangalore-Nidagatta, Ghoshpukur-Salsalabari, Medhsi-Washim, Kohima-Jessami, and Kallagam-Meensurutti, as was forest clearance.

In addition to scrutinizing the Bharatmala program, the PAC also reviewed the welfare schemes of the incumbent Modi government, focusing on their implementation at the grassroots level. Discussions also encompassed the banking system, insurance policies, and energy reforms.

The PAC, a committee comprising elected members of parliament, is entrusted with the task of auditing the revenue and expenditure of the Government of India. It plays a pivotal role in ensuring transparency and accountability in government programmes and spending.

The examination of the Bharatmala programme's cost hike and implementation issues by the PAC reflects its commitment to upholding financial prudence and efficiency in government initiatives, with the aim of benefiting the citizens of India. https://www.millenniumpost.in/nation/public-accounts-committee-examines-cost-hike-in-bharatmala-programme-531824?infinitescroll=1

3. लोक लेखा समिति के सामने कैग की भारतमाला परियोजना रिपोर्ट पेश *(ibc24.in)* September 5, 2023

कांग्रेस सांसद अधीर रंजन चौधरी की अध्यक्षता वाली संसद की लोक लेखा समिति की बैठक में मंगलवार को 'भारतमाला परियोजना' पर नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक (कैग) की हालिया रिपोर्ट पेश हुई। सूत्रों ने यह जानकारी दी।

भारतमाला की राजमार्ग चरण-एक परियोजना के क्रियान्वयन की ऑडिट रिपोर्ट ने एक राजनीतिक विवाद को पैदा कर दिया और विपक्षी दलों ने आवंटन की प्रक्रिया में भ्रष्टाचार का आरोप लगाया।

सड़क परिवहन और राजमार्ग मंत्रालय ने हालांकि कहा कि नियंत्रक एवं महालेखा परीक्षक का यह निष्कर्ष गलत है कि लागत बहुत अधिक थी। ऐसा इसलिए हुआ क्योंकि इसमें वास्तविक लागत को शामिल नहीं किया गया।

सूत्रों ने बताया कि मंगलवार को पीएसी की बैठक में कैग रिपोर्ट पर एक प्रस्तुतीकरण दिया गया। इस रिपोर्ट को 10 अगस्त को संसद में पेश किया गया था। https://www.ibc24.in/business/cags-bharatmala-project-report-presented-before-public-accounts-committee-1720279.html

4. NHAI lost Rs 133cr revenue in two TN toll booths *(newindianexpress.com)* September 6, 2023

While handing over 15km-long road sections developed by the NHAI at its own cost to concessionaires for toll, the pact signed between NHAI and contractors was silent on how the revenue must be shared

CHENNAI: In yet another case of alleged nexus between the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and road building companies, the CAG has found that NHAI had incurred a revenue loss of Rs 133.36 crore in user fee collection at Omalur and Palayam toll plazas between June 2010 and March 2021 due to issues in sharing revenue.

The audit agency said the Salem bypass (7.85 km) on Thumbipadi-Namakkal NH and Thoppur-Thoppurghat section (7.4 km) on Krishnagiri-Thumbipadi NH were converted into four-lane roads by the NHAI using its own funds. But when handing over these stretches to private concessionaires for toll collection, the revenue-sharing agreement was silent on how the revenue must be shared between the authority and the private entities for the 15 km-long road sections developed by the NHAI with its own funds.

Responding to the allegation, the NHAI has denied the non-inclusion of the revenue-sharing clause and claimed that concessionaires had paid Rs 5.20 crore per km for the 7.4 km on Krishnagiri-Thumbipadi NH and Rs 2.56 crore per km for the 7.85km Thumbipadi-to-Namakkal stretch at the time of handing over the roads. The CAG, however, said the NHAI's response was 'untenable' as the concessionaires have not paid proportional revenue for the additional NH parcels given to them.

The average yearly toll collection from Palayam booth, which covers 86km of four-lane road from Krishnagiri to Thumbipadi NH, was Rs 15.86 crore per km. Similarly, Omalur toll, which collects fee from vehicles that run from Thumbipadi to Namakkal (68.62 km), registered an average earning of Rs 9.5 crore per km between 2010 and 2021.

NHAI lost Rs 73.88 cr at Palayam toll gate alone: CAG

"Thus, by not including the four-laned roads under revenue-sharing provisions, the NHAI had incurred a loss of Rs 73.88 crore at the Palayam toll gate and Rs 54.48 crore at the Omalur toll gate between 2010 and 2021," the CAG said.

In January 2006, the NHAI entered into a concession agreement with L&T Krishnagiri Thoppur Toll Road Private Limited for the four-laning of the Krishnagiri-Thoppur (62km) road in the Krishnagiri to Thumbipadi stretch (86 km). The 7.4km from Thoppur to Thoppurghat and 16.6km from Thoppurghat to Thumbipadi NH were built by the NHAI.

While handing over the roads to the concessionaire in 2009, the NHAI entered into a revenue-sharing agreement for the 16.6 km Thoppurghat to Thumbipadi NH, for which 83.86% of the yearly earnings were received. However, a similar provision was not included for the 7.4km Thoppur-Thoppurghat section.

Similarly, in February 2006, NHAI signed a contract with MVR Infrastructure and Tollways Private Limited for the four-laning of Salem bypass to Namakkal (41.5 km) section of the Thumbipadi to Namakkal stretch (68.625 km).

Later, in 2010, the NHAI handed over Thumbipadi to Salem (19.2 km) and Salem bypass (7.85 km) four-lane roads for operation and maintenance. However, only the Thumbipadi-Salem section was included in the revenue-sharing agreement, and the Salem bypass was excluded from it, the CAG pointed out. NHAI officials could not be reached for comments.

Rs 133.36 crore

NHAI has incurred a revenue loss of Rs 133.36 crore from user fees at Krishnagiri and Palayam tolls plazas

Govt body builds roads but private firms collect toll

While handing over 15km-long road sections developed by the NHAI at its own cost to concessionaires for toll collection, the pact signed between NHAI and contractors was silent on how the revenue must be shared.

https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2023/sep/06/nhai-lost-rs-133cr-revenue-in-two-tn-toll-booths-2612095.html

5. India aims to leverage G20 meet to trace missing historical monuments *(etvbharat.com)* September 5, 2023

The government of India has high expectations that the forthcoming G20 Summit scheduled to be held in New Delhi on September 9 and 10 would be helpful in tracing the missing historical monuments from across the country.

A senior government official told ETV Bharat that the cultural track of the G20 Summit will discuss and explore possibilities for a common platform to preserve and protect the heritage The G20 Summit will discuss and explore possibilities for a common platform to preserve and protect the cultural heritage of each country with the use of digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI).

"Policymakers, cultural institutions, and professionals are increasingly mobilizing digital technologies towards not just the conservation of heritage sites, the safeguarding of living heritage, the protection of cultural property and artifacts and the fight against illicit trafficking, or the conservation of documentary heritage, but also in the field of museums, archives, and private collections," the official said.

India has 3,693 centrally protected monuments and sites of national importance, including 24 world heritage property, 52 site museums spread all over India which are directly under the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Although 92 monuments declared "missing" in a CAG report, 42 monuments have been identified due to efforts made by the ASI and out of CAG the remaining 50 monuments, 14 are affected by rapid urbanisation, 12 are submerged in reservoirs or dams while the location of the remaining 24 is untraceable.

In view of the transformative impact of digital technologies on the conservation, documentation, safeguarding and monitoring of cultural heritage, and the existing technical, ethical and policy challenges, the working group under India's G20 Presidency earlier mobilized the G20 members towards expanding the global reflection on digital technologies for cultural heritage, including strengthening of research, data collection and exchange of good practices.

It also aimed to strengthen national and regional policy frameworks to encompass issues related to digital technologies in more systemic ways, building on a rights-based approach, including through capacity building.

"Despite the strides taken in digitisation of cultural heritage, a digital divide exists in terms of gender gap, socio-economic factors and language barriers. Particularly, a collaborative and participatory framework approach for synergies with international organizations, universities, technology firms, and communities would be a significant step in the right direction to bridge the existing digital divide by sharing best practices," the official said.

It is worth mentioning that the G20 Culture Ministers met for the first time in 2020 and highlighted culture's cross-cutting contribution to advancing the G20 agenda.

Recognizing the synergies between culture and other policy areas, and considering the impact of culture, heritage and the creative economy on social and environmental dimensions of development, it was integrated into the G20 agenda as a Culture Working Group in 2021. The group aims to strengthen international cooperation and collaboration to support cultural and creative industries.

The working group organised a series of four global thematic webinars between March and April this year to harness the priorities set forth by India through shared expertise and best practices to firmly position culture as an engine for propelling inclusive sustainable socioeconomic recovery and development. https://www.etvbharat.com/english/bharat/india-aims-to-leverage-g20-meet-to-trace-missing-historical-monuments/na20230905194711305305056

SELECTED NEWS ITEMS/ARTICLES FOR READING

6. Stable and promising *(millenniumpost.in)* 05 Sep 2023

The initial reservations floated against the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime in India are now by and large off the scene, with the indirect tax system consistently showing resilience and stability as the time passes. Its performance in recent times has garnered significant attention. The latest data on GST revenue for August, pertaining to July transactions, reveals a promising picture for India's fiscal health. With a growth rate of 10.76 per cent, GST collections reached a substantial sum of Rs 1,59,069 crore in August, being only marginally lower than the government's rational target of an average monthly GST receipt of Rs 1.6 trillion for the current fiscal year. In fact, the first five months of the fiscal year 2023-24 have already exceeded expectations, with an average monthly collection of Rs 1.66 lakh crore, significantly surpassing the set target. This remarkable progression can be largely attributed to the record-breaking collection of Rs 1.87 lakh crore in April, which set the stage for a robust fiscal year in the beginning itself. Breaking down the GST collection figures for August, it may be observed that Central GST (CGST) collections amounted to Rs 28,328 crore, State GST collections stood at Rs 35,794 crore, and Integrated GST (IGST) reached Rs 83,251 crore. While the numbers are certainly indicative of a stable trajectory, it's essential to consider the GST collection figures between July and August. Between July and August, both the growth rate of GST collections and absolute GST collections experienced a decline. In July, GST collections amounted to Rs 1.65 lakh crore, but this figure decreased slightly to Rs 1.59 lakh crore in August. The year-on-year growth rate also showed a marginal dip, from 10.8 per cent in July to 10.76 per cent in August. Despite these minor fluctuations, which are anticipated as people's spending patterns shift, the GST regime demonstrates resilience and maintains a steady course. What adds to the reassurance is that the recent GST collection figures received a boost from increased consumption seen across the nation. Even in the face of erratic monsoon patterns, July witnessed businesses generating a substantial 87.95 million electronic waybills (e-way bills) for the transportation of goods. This represents a modest increase compared to the previous month, June, when 86.05 million e-way bills were generated. E-way bills serve as crucial documents for the movement of goods, and their rise signifies ongoing economic activity, which is a positive indicator for the overall health of the economy. Furthermore, the consistent growth in GST collections aligns harmoniously with India's robust year-on-year GDP growth of 7.8 per cent in the first

quarter — marking the highest growth rate in the last four quarters. This synergy between GST revenues and GDP growth reflects the effectiveness of the GST framework in supporting economic growth. As we look ahead, a considerably long festive season is just around the corner, and with it, there is likely to be a potential surge in consumer spending. This festive season is likely to serve as a catalyst for both GDP growth and GST revenues, further reinforcing the optimistic outlook for India's fiscal year. The festive season traditionally witnesses increased economic activity, and this year is expected to be no exception. To sum up, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in India is treading a stable trajectory, and barring any unforeseen major shocks, it appears well-poised to comfortably achieve its target of an average monthly GST receipt of Rs 1.6 trillion in the current fiscal year. The GST collections, bolstered by a resilient economy and the promise of a festive season, offer an encouraging outlook for India's fiscal future. This steady growth in GST revenues not only benefits the government but also reflects the strength and resilience of the Indian economy as a whole. There are enough reasons to feel upbeat.
https://www.millenniumpost.in/editorial/stable-and-promising-531764

7. The tax base is growing – government shouldn't waste the opportunity *(indianexpress.com)* 06 Sep 2023

In the run up to almost every budget, when asked to spend, the common refrain has been that, constrained by its limited tax revenues, the Union government hardly has any room to manoeuvre. However, contrary to the widely held notion that only a small section of society pays taxes, there has been a steady increase in both direct and indirect tax payers over the past few years. This increase in the tax base has occurred not d0uring a phase of rapid economic expansion, but of slower, uneven growth. While, ideally, this expansion should have raised the tax to GDP ratio, creating greater fiscal space for the government to spend on public goods, cuts in both direct and indirect tax rates (GST), along with the pandemic-induced economic disruptions, have depressed the fiscal gains accruing from this surge in tax payers.

This would suggest that the almost stable tax to GDP ratio (direct and indirect/GST) is, in part, the consequence of a conscious policy choice — of shifting to a low tax regime. Whether this is driven by ideological or political considerations is another matter. But what it has done is left more in the hands of the private sector, while leaving the government with fewer resources to fund its development objectives.

Take a look at the direct tax base. During the assessment year 2014-15, the number of companies paying tax stood at 7.46 lakh. By 2022-23, they had risen to 10.7 lakh — an increase of around 43 per cent. Over the same period, the number of individual taxpayers grew by 65 per cent, rising from 5.38 crore to 8.9 crore. The disaggregated data shows that small taxpayers (those with incomes less than Rs 5 lakh) account for a sizable number of these new tax payers.

Similar trends can be observed in the case of indirect tax payers. The number of active GST payers (as of June 2023) stood at 1.4 crore, up from 1.2 crore in 2019. Around 80 per cent of these taxpayers are proprietorships, while another 10 per cent are partnerships. These two categories, in fact, account for most of the increase in the tax base over these years. This was only to be expected. Smaller establishments, after all, also have an incentive to register under GST as it allows them to avail input tax credit.

The effects of coming under the indirect tax net are possibly reflected in the increase in direct tax payers as well.

As the number of establishments in the country is pegged at around 6.4 crore, these numbers also imply that at the very least 22 per cent of firms are formal in nature, paying some form of taxes. In comparison, even though the number of individual taxpayers is higher than the contributing members of the EPFO, as these taxpayers would also include individuals not part of the labour force, such as retirees receiving interest/rental income, the share of the formal labour force is likely to be lower in comparison. However, this does suggest that income tax payers are no longer restricted to a tiny sliver of the labour force.

Part of this increase in the tax base is the natural consequence of the economy growing in size — more companies are setting up shop, more individuals are entering the labour force, and more formal sector jobs are being created. Alongside, the growing formalisation of the economy is also likely to have played a role by making tax evasion or avoidance a more complicated exercise. And while the lowering of tax rates during this period may have also played a part, it has also meant that this expansion in the tax base hasn't translated into a commensurate surge in the tax to GDP ratio.

In September 2019, the government announced a cut in the corporate tax rate for existing companies from 30 per cent to 22 per cent. Broadly speaking, that translates to a reduction of about 25 per cent (though in effective terms it differs). As per the government, the revenue loss on account of this was Rs 1.28 lakh crore in 2019-20 and Rs 1 lakh crore in 2020-21 (neglecting the impact of non-availability of exemptions under this regime). The corporate tax to GDP ratio stood at 3.5 per cent in 2018-19. By 2022-23, it had declined to around 3.1 per cent.

On the personal income tax front, in the interim budget of 2019, the government had announced that individual taxpayers with taxable income upto Rs 5 lakh would get a full tax rebate. While the personal income tax to GDP ratio rose from 2.5 per cent in 2018-19 to 3 per cent in 2022-23, the number of individuals with zero tax liability also increased from 2.9 crore in 2019-20 to 5.16 crore in 2022-23. Considering the most recent changes to the tax structure — the rebate limit has been raised to Rs 7 lakh under the new tax regime — individuals with zero tax liability may rise further, limiting the gains from an expansion in the tax base.

In the case of GST, while the Subramanian committee report had pegged the revenue neutral rate at 15.5 per cent, as per a report by RBI, the weighted average GST rate fell from 14.4 per cent at the time of transition to 11.6 per cent in 2019 due to the various tax cuts in November 2017 and December 2018.

Despite tax rates being lower by around 25 per cent, collections have remained broadly stable. Indirect tax collections (subsumed under GST) stood at around 6.3 per cent of GDP in 2016-17. In comparison, GST collections were at 6.6 per cent of GDP in 2022-23. Excluding revenue from the compensation cess, collections were 6.2 per cent.

It is difficult to arrive at firm estimates of the tax revenue implications on account of these cuts. But, these numbers do suggest a strengthening of the fiscal foundations of the Indian state. While tax collections will invariably be influenced by the underlying economic momentum, as the country traverses the development path, as it transitions from a lower to an upper-middle-income economy, as the share of the organised sector rises, more gains will accrue. This will increase the fiscal space for the government to enhance its spending, if it so chooses. These gains should not be squandered away by increasing give-aways. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-tax-base-is-growing-government-shouldnt-waste-the-opportunity-8926315/

8. Central bank digital currencies: Reducing friction *(indianexpress.com)* 06 Sep 2023

Across the world, central banks are examining the prospects of issuing digital currencies. As per the Atlantic Council, 19 of the G20 countries are now in advanced stages of development of CBDCs (central bank digital currencies). Twenty-one countries have launched pilot projects, while 11 countries have introduced a digital currency. The Reserve Bank of India has also been taking tentative steps towards that end. In October 2022, it issued a concept note on central bank digital currencies. Subsequently, it launched pilots of CBDCs in both the wholesale and retail segments. The pilot in the wholesale segment involved the settlement of secondary market transactions in government securities, while that in the retail segment was launched with a closed user group covering select locations. On Monday, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das, while speaking at the G20 TechSprint finale, said that the central bank is “slowly and steadily expanding the CBDC pilots to more banks, cities, people and use cases.”

As per the RBI’s annual report, cities such as Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Indore and Kochi are being added to the pilot in phases. The adoption of the retail CBDC has also been gaining traction. As per reports, it has crossed over a million users and 2.6 lakh merchants. The central bank is aiming for 10 lakh CBDC transactions per day by the end of this year. Considering the widespread usage of the UPI architecture — in July, 9.96 billion transactions were routed through it — interoperability with this payment system could help trigger widespread adoption.

Several benefits could accrue from CBDCs. Along with bringing down the operational costs associated with physical cash management, it could also make the inter-bank market more efficient. Further, as Das also pointed out, CBDCs can help make cross-border payments “cheaper, faster and more secure” with their instant settlement features. Considering that India is a big recipient of remittances this could lower the costs and frictions associated with these transactions, bringing in wider benefits. However, considering the wide-ranging implications that CBDCs could have on the financial and monetary system, the central bank must proceed with caution. It must rigorously examine the empirical data that it is generating, and use it carefully to determine how to proceed forward. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/express-view-on-central-bank-digital-currencies-reducing-friction-8926308/

9. Cost India needs to bear to become Bharat will leave you stunned *(siasat.com)* 06 Sep 2023

Amid speculations claiming that the Union Government is considering the removal of "India" from the Constitution, people have started wondering about the cost that the country will incur to become "Bharat."

After the country becomes "Bharat," it needs to update its maps, road navigation systems, landmarks, and more. In addition to it, private organisations will also need to bear the costs.

Cost for India to become 'Bharat'
In 2018, when the monarch of Swaziland renamed the country to Eswatini, intellectual property lawyer Darren Olivier devised a method to calculate the cost associated with renaming a country.

According to him, the average marketing cost of a large enterprise is approximately 6 percent of its total revenue, and the rebranding exercise costs nearly 10 percent of the average marketing cost. Using this method, he calculated the cost of renaming Swaziland to Eswatini as USD 60 million.

If the same method is applied to calculate the cost that India will incur to become "Bharat," it amounts to Rs 14,304 crore, considering the country's revenue receipts in FY23, which include tax and non-tax revenue, totaling Rs 23.84 lakh crore.

Opposition criticizes Union Government
Shortly after Rashtrapati Bhavan (the President's House) sent out invites for a G20 dinner on September 9 in the name of the President of Bharat instead of the usual President of India, the opposition began criticising the BJP.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee termed it a blatant attempt to distort the country's history and launched a scathing attack against the BJP and the government.

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut stated on Wednesday that changing the name of India to Bharat amounts to 'an insult' to the Constitution framed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Is Union Government going to remove "India" from Constitution?

According to media reports, the Union government may consider removing the word "India" from the constitution during the upcoming Special Session of Parliament scheduled to be held from September 18 to 22.

To remove "India" from the constitution, the government needs to amend Article 1(1) of the Constitution, which states, "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States."

Given the substantial costs associated with this change, it remains to be seen whether the government will actually amend Article 1. https://www.siasat.com/cost-india-needs-to-bear-to-become-bharat-will-leave-you-stunned-2687619/

10. Armoured Recovery Vehicles: India's Bold Move to strengthen its Defence Arsenal *(financialexpress.com)* 05 Sep 2023

To bolster India's defence capabilities, the Ministry of defence has initiated the procurement of 170 Armoured Recovery Vehicles (ARVs) based on a tracked platform. This move, announced on September 5, 2023, is a part of the government's commitment to the 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiatives, stressing self-reliance and indigenous production.

These ARVs will play a crucial role in ensuring the operational readiness of the Indian Army, particularly in challenging terrain and weather conditions. The procurement process has already begun with the issuance of a Request for Information (RFI), aiming to finalize the Standard Qualitative Requirements (SQRs), determine the procurement category, and identify potential Indian vendors capable of supplying ARVs within a tight timeline of two years from the Award of Contract/Supply Order, with a minimum requirement of 50 ARV vehicles per year.

The operational requirements for these ARVs are extensive. They must be equipped to navigate diverse terrains, from plains and deserts along the Western Borders to high-altitude mountainous regions found along the Northern Borders of India. Moreover, they need to operate perfectly day and night, under various weather conditions, including snowy, rainy, dusty, and sandy environments. These vehicles must also withstand extreme temperature ranges, from as low as -20°C to as high as 45°C, depending on the terrain.

The primary function of these ARVs is to provide repair and recovery cover to disabled Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) during hostile operations. They will be configured on tracked chassis, ensuring mobility across different terrains. These vehicles will have a carrying capacity of at least six persons, including the driver and commander, and will be equipped with essential utility tools such as cranes, dozers, winches, general tools, special maintenance tools, and ancillary equipment required for repair and recovery missions.

The service life of these ARVs is expected to be a minimum of 32 years, with the possibility of one major overhaul or repair intervention. They must also be transportable through various means, including existing in-service tank transporter vehicles of the Indian Army, transport aircraft of the Indian Air Force, and broad-gauge railway military bogeys.

These ARVs are crucial components in the maintenance and support of Main Battle Tanks (MBTs) like the 'Arjun.' They facilitate efficient and speedy repair and recovery operations during combat situations.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has collaborated with state-owned Bharat Earth Movers Limited (BEML) to manufacture them for the Indian Army. These vehicles have impressive lifting and pulling capacities, ensuring their effectiveness in the field.

Currently, BEML-built ARVs, based on Russian-made T-72 tank hulls, are in use, armed with a 12.7mm machine gun and equipped with powerful cranes capable of lifting up to 15 tons. Additionally, there are upgraded variants like the WZT-3M, produced in collaboration with Polish company Bumar. These ARVs, also known as ARV-3 in the Indian Army, have proven their worth in recovery operations.

These versatile vehicles are designed to recover damaged MBTs, tracked armoured vehicles, and heavy vehicles from the battlefield. They are equipped with tools for minor field repairs and earth-moving projects, enhancing the Army's self-sufficiency during operations.

Over the years, India has made substantial investments in ARVs, with contracts dating back to 1999. However, as per media reports, a significant order worth US$275 million for 204 ARV-3/WZT-3M vehicles was scrapped in 2012. Despite such setbacks, the Ministry of Defence's recent initiative to procure 170 ARVs reflects a commitment to maintaining a robust and agile defence infrastructure capable of addressing diverse operational challenges.

In conclusion, the procurement of Armoured Recovery Vehicles marks a pivotal step in enhancing India's defence capabilities. These vehicles will provide invaluable support to the Indian Army, ensuring the swift recovery and repair of combat assets under challenging conditions. The 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiatives continue to drive self-sufficiency and innovation in India. https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-armoured-recovery-vehicles-indias-bold-move-to-strengthen-its-defence-arsenal-3234029/

11. India sees alarming 29% rise in per capita coal emissions, amidst global transition to clean energy: Report *(economictimes.indiatimes.com)* 06 Sep 2023

Both India and China have been grappling with rapid electricity demand growth, outpacing the expansion of renewable energy sources in recent years. This surge has led to an increase in coal-fired generation, contributing to the rise in per capita coal emissions.

India has witnessed a significant surge of 29% in per capita coal emissions over the last seven years, according to a report released by the global energy think tank 'Ember.' The annual report, titled 'Changes in per capita coal power emissions of G20 countries,' sheds light on the challenges and progress of various countries in transitioning to cleaner sources of electricity.

Both India and China, often criticized as major coal power polluters, have been grappling with rapid electricity demand growth, outpacing the expansion of renewable energy sources in recent years. This surge in demand has led to an increase in coal-fired generation, contributing to the rise in per capita coal emissions.

The report also said that, among the G20 economies, 12 out of 20 countries managed to reduce their per capita coal emissions since 2015. However, it highlighted a concerning trend as the G20's overall per capita coal emissions increased by approximately 9% from 1.5 tonne of carbon dioxide in 2015 to 1.6 tonne of carbon dioxide in 2022.

Dave Jones, Global Insights Lead at Ember, commented on the findings, stating, "China and India are often blamed as the world's big coal power polluters. But when you take population into account, South Korea and Australia were the worst polluters still in 2022. As mature economies, they should be scaling up renewable electricity ambitiously and confidently enough to enable coal to be phased out by 2030."

Australia and South Korea, despite reducing their per capita coal emissions by 26% and 10%, respectively, since 2015, still lead in coal Pollution by more than three times the world average due to their higher starting points.

Two G20 countries, Indonesia and Turkey, saw notable increases in per capita coal power emissions over the last seven years, although they remain below the world average. Indonesia experienced the highest percentage rise among the G20, with per capita coal power emissions surging by 56% from 2015 to 2022, while Turkey saw a significant increase of 41% in emissions per capita.

In China, per capita coal power emissions rose by 30%, trailing only behind Australia and South Korea. This increase was attributed to rapidly growing demand outpacing the growth in clean energy generation. Despite the addition of 670 GW of renewables since 2015, China's per capita coal emissions increased by about 4% annually on average during the same period.

Russia's per capita emissions also grew by 20% since 2015, while Japan saw a relatively modest increase of 2% in per capita coal power emissions.

The report suggested that the rise in emissions per capita can be attributed to the ongoing use of coal to meet the increased demand as pandemic restrictions ease, as well as extreme weather events in summer and winter, which drove up coal generation.

The G20 represents approximately 80% of global power sector carbon dioxide emissions, making it a crucial player in global efforts to accelerate the transition to clean energy. India is set to host the G20 Leaders' Summit on September 9 and 10 in Delhi this year.

Aditya Lolla, Asia Programme Lead at Ember, emphasized India's unique opportunity as the host of the G20 summit, stating, "India, as the host of the G20 summit, has the opportunity to assume climate leadership in the G20 and hold the bloc accountable. India's plans to ramp up renewable energy seem to align well with the COP28 president's call for tripling renewables by 2030. India's early backing to this call can not only influence the G20 into action but also ensure that developed countries bring their per capita emissions down."

The report underscores the pressing need for accelerated efforts to transition to cleaner energy sources in order to mitigate the impact of coal emissions on the environment and climate change. https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/coal/india-sees-alarming-29-rise-in-per-capita-coal-emissions-amidst-global-transition-to-clean-energy-report/103416838

12. Why Indian Cities Still Unprepared for Flooding *(newsclick.in)*

06 Sep 2023

Urban flood disasters have incrementally increased over the past three decades. According to the National Disaster Management Authority, the most notable cities flooded in this period are Hyderabad in 2000, Ahmedabad in 2001, Delhi in 2002 and 2003, Chennai in 2004, Mumbai in 2005, Surat in 2006, Kolkata in 2007, Jamshedpur in 2008, Delhi in 2009, Guwahati and Delhi in 2010, and again in 2023, Srinagar in 2014, and Chennai in 2015. Even towns like Barmer, known as desert towns in the Thar desert, were not spared and have seen floods during this period.

Surprisingly, mountain towns, which hardly witnessed flooding as water washed down the slopes, have also witnessed some of the worst forms of flooding, triggering massive landslides. Examples include Dharamshala and Shimla.

According to a response in the Indian parliament, over 17,000 people died in floods and heavy rains between 2012 and 2021 in the country. Considering the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), specifically Reports VI and the findings of Working Groups 1, 2, and 3, these disasters should not come as a surprise. The IPCC Report warns the Indian subcontinent of increased extreme climate events, particularly in two specific zones: coastal areas and the Himalayas. Anticipated trends include intensified rainfall occurring in shorter timeframes, meaning more rain in less time. Without climate-resilient urban infrastructure, flooding and landslides are imminent.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) states that the urban heat island effect has increased rainfall over urban areas due to global climate change, resulting in altered weather patterns and more high-intensity rainfall events in shorter periods. The threat of sea-level rise is also looming large, endangering coastal cities, riverside areas, dam upstreams/downstreams, inland cities, and hilly regions alike.

This phenomenon has been witnessed with increasing rapidity in recent decades. Urbanisation is transforming India's landscape at an unprecedented pace. Structural changes, brought about by liberalisation since the mid-90s, promoted cities as 'engines of growth' to attract investments. This led to reforms in land laws, making land readily available for real estate projects and fostering competition among cities. This trend was further reinforced by initiatives like the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and the Smart City Mission (SCM), both emphasising project-oriented development of hard infrastructure.

However, this blind race resulted in the encroachment on urban commons, water bodies, disruption of water channels, alteration of water contours, and the conversion of open spaces into housing projects.

One consequence was the rapid expansion of cities. From 1991 to 2001, 221 towns and cities merged, compared to 100 in the preceding decade (1981-1991). The confluence of rapid development, poor planning, and climate change has led to recurrent urban flooding incidents, disrupting lives and causing economic losses.

Causes of Urban Flooding

Every city has its peculiarities and is adapted or un-adapted to flood risks in a manner of its historical evolution. However, some common areas need a universal approach for minimising the loss incurred by urban floods, eventually leading to disasters.

Drainage System:
One of the primary reasons for urban flooding in Indian cities is the inadequate drainage infrastructure. Many urban areas lack well-designed stormwater drainage systems capable of handling heavy rainfall. As cities expand without proper planning, impervious surfaces like roads and buildings prevent water from seeping into the ground, overwhelming the insufficient drainage systems. The design of the drains is also an important feature. Concretising the drains and not allowing the water to percolate in the ground further compounds the flooding problem.

Urbanisation:
Rapid urbanisation, both planned and unplanned, is also responsible for flooding. Take, for example, the construction of flyovers, widening of roads, and urban settlements - or what is called ‘grey’ infrastructure - in a planned manner, duly approved by the competent authorities, but in water-logged areas, all of them are responsible for urban flooding. Floods in Gurgaon and Bangalore are examples of such planning failures. Another failure is the construction of highways traversing water bodies that feed rivers and streams; such construction is also a major reason for urban flooding. For example, the ‘Kisan Path’ in Lucknow-circular Road circumferences the entire district. It has affected the Kukrail River in Lucknow and has blocked the drainage near the origin of the river.

Gurugram experiences floods during rains mainly because of severe disruption of the natural drainage system caused by the construction of roads and permanent concrete structures on wetlands.

Another major reason is improper waste disposal practices. Clogged drains and waterways filled with solid waste prevent water from flowing freely, exacerbating flood risks. The lack of proper waste management systems in many cities worsens this problem.

Loss of Urban Commons:
Many cities have witnessed encroachment and illegal construction on water bodies like lakes, ponds, and rivers, and in urban green patches or mini forests, often referred to as ‘blue infrastructure’. This results in reduced water storage capacity and disrupts the natural water flow, leading to increased flooding during heavy rains. Likewise, massive land use change from open spaces, parks, and playgrounds to more concrete surfaces in the form of built-in areas and real estate reduces the water percolating in the ground and instead triggers flooding.

To ensure that we make our cities resilient, liveable, and safer, we need a multifaceted approach for effective mitigation. This hinges on planning, which centrally includes ‘Cityzens’ and outlines short-term and medium-term collective action plans. From our experience of working with urban floods, the following are the fundamentals:

Creating Climate Atlas:
Before a development plan, every town and city must prepare its climate plan of action and, thus, a climate atlas. The climate atlas must be done with the active participation of the people. The vulnerable points must be identified, water contouring must be done, and a complete 'no' should be the reverberating voice for damaging the water bodies or channels. Likewise, capacity building of the people must be built to adapt to flooding and other climate disasters.

Sustainable Urban Planning:
Cities need to embrace sustainable urban planning practices that consider the natural topography and hydrology of the region. This includes preserving natural water bodies and floodplains, as well as integrating green spaces that can absorb excess water. Flood-resilient infrastructure must be built that includes minimal engagement with the water contours. Improved drainage systems can help in minimising and combating flooding in urban spaces. Improved water management methods by enhancing waste collection and segregation must be practised. A protocol for clearing the drains during the summer months must be followed. Simultaneously, green cover must be increased, and a massive drive for reforestation must be unleashed.

Early warning systems play an important role in minimising the loss to human lives. Timely alerts can help in responding swiftly and can save lives and assets. People must be at the centre of preparing disaster mitigation and adaptation strategies.

To minimise the loss from urban flooding, what is required is a multi-faceted approach for effective mitigation. Climate resilient strategies firmly rooted in a pro-people approach and a complete 'no' to occupying water bodies must be the priority to meet the challenges of urban flooding. https://www.newsclick.in/why-indian-cities-still-unprepared-flooding

13. City-centered climate action: Measuring progress for tangible change *(financialexpress.com)* September 5, 2023

India's G20 presidency has taken commendable steps to empower cities and elevate their role in the fight against climate change.

In recent weeks, northern India has witnessed the harsh realities of climate disasters as the region endured the devastating consequences of record-breaking rainfall and flooding. Hardest hit among the impacted areas is Himachal Pradesh, where the onslaught of floods and landslides wreaked havoc, causing loss of life and widespread property damage. Even the capital city Delhi found itself grappling with unprecedented flooding. Prolonged spells of torrential downpours inundated streets and disrupted vital services, including water, electricity, and transport facilities.

Prior to this, the region had already faced yet another climate ordeal, as scorching heatwaves inflicted heat-related illnesses on hundreds. What's even more alarming is the rising frequency of such occurrences, demanding urgent action on the global climate crisis. Countries like India must plan and act accordingly to address these pressing climate issues. This requires a robust and proactive approach that combines both climate adaptation and accelerated mitigation efforts.

As the UN Secretary General rightly emphasized, climate battle will largely be won or lost in cities. With more than 70 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions and 75 per cent of global primary energy consumption originating from urban areas, cities wield considerable influence over the trajectory of climate change. At the same time, they are increasingly vulnerable to multiple climate change risks – such as floods, heatwaves, and disaster-induced displacement. Rapid urbanization and resource consumption further exacerbate the strain on these densely populated urban areas.

India's G20 presidency has taken commendable steps to empower cities and elevate their role in the fight against climate change. The recently concluded Urban 20 (U20) Mayoral Summit and the G20 Infrastructure Working Group set a powerful precedent, highlighting the indispensable role cities play in driving climate action forward. The deliberations and outcomes from these G20 engagement and working groups have underscored the significance of a fundamental transformation towards a low-carbon and resilient urban future but the transformation depends on how local governments approach urban planning, governance, management, and financing.

Measuring their climate progress and building capacities accordingly are critical steps in this transition. Cities must be equipped with essential information about their current status regarding climate vulnerabilities, greenhouse gas emission reduction efforts, and resilience measures.

This data-driven approach serves as the foundation for setting ambitious targets, tracking progress, and making informed policies and decisions. By developing credible frameworks with clear evaluation criteria, cities can establish a common language, benchmark their performance against peers, identify strengths and weaknesses in development policies, and foster transparency and accountability. This facilitates evidence-based decision-making processes, empowering urban administrators to make impactful changes for a sustainable and resilient future.

Moreover, measuring climate progress can also help cities make more informed budgeting decisions and garnering financial support from external funders. Private financiers prioritize the bankability of projects and require accurate direction for effective investment. Access to standardized, up-to-date climate information, including budgetary allocations, benefits both city officials and private investors. This also acts as a stepping stone in bridging the bankability gap and mobilizing financial resources to support cities' sustainable endeavours.

Indian cities like Mumbai and more recently – Ahmedabad are taking the lead in combating climate change by creating their own climate action plans. These plans go beyond greenhouse gas inventories and include identifying climate vulnerable areas, proposing effective implementation measures, and outlining the required financial resources. Additionally, the Climate Smart Cities Assessment Framework (CSCAF) by the Government of India serves as a credible and valuable guide, helping cities diagnose climate action gaps and collate data for a comprehensive understanding of progress and improvement areas. Other innovative tools like the cost-benefit analysis tool for smart surfaces, developed by the Smart Surfaces Coalition and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), can also be shared among city governments to combat extreme summer heat and facilitate better urban planning.

However, to translate and implement the learnings from such frameworks, two other key elements come into play: institutional capacity and political will. Urban administrators must be equipped with the necessary skills for data collection, strategic planning, investment evaluation, and administrative coordination.

A common challenge that municipalities often face is the compartmentalization of climate change expertise within specific departments, which hinders comprehensive and cross-cutting interventions. To overcome this, strong emphasis must be placed on ensuring accountability in administration. Furthermore, limited jurisdiction of city governments, coupled with a preference for other development concerns, such as access to basic infrastructure, can pose additional obstacles. Striking a balance between these priorities and integrating climate action into overall development planning are crucial for a sustainable future.

As part of the U20 Communiqué 2023, over 100 city mayors implore G20 nations to unite as "equal and valuable partners" in tackling climate challenges head-on, while creating enabling environments to support their local governments. As we confront challenges of unprecedented magnitude, the importance of collaborative efforts with multiple stakeholders and coordinated actions across government levels becomes abundantly clear. These essential measures will steer us towards a sustainable and climate resilient future for generations to come. https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/city-centered-climate-action-measuring-progress-for-tangible-change/3233728/

14. Emerging trends powering India's clean energy transition *(financialexpress.com)* September 6, 2023

India has witnessed remarkable progress in the renewable energy sector, particularly in solar and wind energy, encouraged by favourable policies, technological advancements, and strategic investments. At the G20 Energy Transitions Ministers' Meeting hosted in Goa in July, member countries recognised the importance of specific technologies, minerals, and materials to the clean energy transition. They emphasised maintaining reliable, responsible, and sustainable supply chains and agreed on the need for resilient infrastructure, the plugging of technology gaps, and access to low-cost financing.

Advancements in solar energy
Solar is critical to India's renewable energy mix. Its cumulative solar module manufacturing capacity witnessed remarkable growth, which more than doubled from 18GW in March 2022 to 38GW by March 2023. As of June 2023, India's peak power demand reached 223.23 GW, a 4.4 percent increase from the previous year, and the country's cumulative solar power capacity reached an impressive 70GW. Projections indicate that within the next 3-5 years, India has the potential to achieve 100GW of solar module manufacturing capacity, a milestone that would make the country self-sufficient and generate employment opportunities for millions of people. In a collaboration aimed at accelerating adoption in Maharashtra, a road map was charted for a 500MW tender under the PM-KUSUM-C scheme. The initiative is slated to bring an investment of INR2,500 crore in solar energy, a reduction of 400,000 tonnes of CO_2 emissions annually, and support for 100,000 farmers.

New innovations in solar include cells with enhanced durability, the ability to print solar cells on flexible surfaces, panels designed to track the sun's trajectory from east to west throughout the day, and solar power plants engineered to operate efficiently during nighttime hours. Agrivoltaic farming allows for the cultivation of crops beneath solar panels, maximising land utilisation and helping foster synergies between agricultural and solar energy production processes. Floating solar power plants have also become part of India's solar expansion strategies. Based on a study conducted by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), India's reservoirs, which span an area of 18,000sq km, hold the potential to generate 280GW of electricity through floating solar panels.

Wind power potential

From April 2022 to January 2023, India successfully generated about 64.5 billion units of electricity through wind energy projects. The government has taken decisive action to introduce offshore wind projects with a combined capacity of 10GW off the coast of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy introduced a draft policy to repower outdated and underperforming wind turbines, aiming to unlock the full potential of wind projects. Modern wind energy turbines are well-suited to increased power production; able to withstand stormy weather conditions, they are also equipped with condition-monitoring technology, facilitating seamless integration with monitoring platforms. Moreover, these turbines exhibit enhanced capabilities in load management. The Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet (GEAPP), a coalition of philanthropy, government, technology, policy, and financing partners, aids the Indian government in overcoming policy and regulatory barriers to wind energy adoption and integration. GEAPP's collaboration on clean energy policies applies to all the countries it works in. For example, GEAPP supports Vietnam's Power Development Plan 8 (PDP8), which aims to more than double power generation capacity to 150GW from 69GW in 2020. The vision is for onshore wind to contribute 14.5 per cent of total power capacity by 2030 (21,880MW out of 150,489MW) with a target of 60-77GW by 2050.

The role of hydropower

India has a huge untapped potential with respect to hydropower, which has the potential to become the country's largest source of clean energy after solar. According to India Energy Security Scenarios (IESS), hydro plants will contribute 10 percent of the national installed generation capacity by 2047. India holds the sixth position globally in terms of hydropower resources, estimated at around 150GW from large hydropower sources. Earlier this year, India issued guidelines to promote the development of pumped storage projects that set out financial mechanisms and policies to monetise their reliability and flexibility. They also outlined potential tax and land exemptions to help improve the financial viability of pumped hydropower projects.

In conclusion

As India continues to advance in the renewable energy sector, it is positioned to play a pivotal role in the global transition towards a sustainable energy future. The challenges encountered by the sector, including grid integration and storage capacity, are being actively tackled through government initiatives, and India's achievements inspire other nations to emulate and address similar issues. https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-emerging-trends-powering-indias-clean-energy-transition-3234917/